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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL ON PM HUN SEN:
IMPROVING SITUATION AT PREAH VIHEAR AND IMPROVING BILATERAL
RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.

REF: PHNOM PENH 679

Classified By: Classified by: Ambassador Joseph Mussomeli for reasons 1
.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. During the Ambassador's farewell call on Prime Minister Hun Sen August 20, the Prime Minister thanked the U.S. for its encouragement for a peaceful resolution to the dispute over Preah Vihear and expressed his appreciation for the Ambassador's contribution to improved relations between the two countries. PM Hun Sen confided that although the results of the Cambodian-Thai bilateral talks earlier this week still need to be put before the Thai cabinet for approval, the results "exceeded (his) expectations." The PM indicated that both sides have agreed to resolve the dispute through the Joint Border Commission, and in the context of broader issues. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Recognizing that historically U.S.-Cambodian relations have been fraught with misunderstandings and mistrust, PM Hun Sen expressed his appreciation for the marked improvements over the past three years. He highlighted the increasingly robust mil-to-mil relationship, exemplified by recent U.S. ship visits and cooperation on MIA issues, as well as the presence of Peace Corps volunteers throughout Cambodia as indicative of the improved level of trust between the two countries. The Ambassador credited Hun Sen's leadership and efforts to understand the U.S. as contributing to building a better working relationship to the benefit of both countries, while cautioning that 50 years of difficult relations will require continued attention by both governments to ensure a fully normal and multifaceted relationship in the future.

13. (C) The Ambassador applauded Hun Sen for exercising patience and courage in avoiding armed confrontation over Preah Vihear. Hun Sen confided that the dispute, arising so close to the national election, posed a great challenge to him and he expressed his gratitude for U.S. support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. He recalled that tensions had risen to the point where Thai and Cambodian soldiers had guns pointed directly at each other. However, he gave the order for Cambodian troops to stand down, thus abating tensions and allowing room for a diplomatic solution. Hun Sen cited the Russian use of force in Georgia to illustrate the point that Thailand and Cambodia narrowly escaped a similar fate.

14. (C) Dismissing local media's criticism of the outcome of the August 18-19 bilateral meeting as narrow-minded nationalism, Hun Sen stated that FM Hor Namhong briefed him on the outcome of the talks and that the results "exceeded"

his expectations. He noted that details of what had been agreed would not be discussed publicly until approval by the Thai cabinet. Hun Sen emphasized that the border dispute would be resolved in the context of other areas of cooperation with Thailand, perhaps referring to the Joint Border Commission, which local media report will convene in October to take up the border issue. He also stressed that FM Hor Namhong's audience with the Thai king sends a positive message regarding both sides' commitment to cooperate to resolve the problem peacefully.

15. (C) The Ambassador explained continued U.S. support for resolution of the dispute. He noted the advantages of a bilateral approach, warning that, while still an option, resort to the UNSC could damage relations with Thailand in the long term. He also expressed his hope that the statesmanship demonstrated by Hun Sen during this crisis will be applied as wisely to his dealings with the political opposition following CPP's victory at the July polls.

16. (C) Reflecting on the progress achieved in U.S.-Cambodian relations, Hun Sen mused that during the 1960s he engaged in anti-U.S. protests. The Ambassador replied that ironically during this same time, he was briefly expelled from school for organizing protests against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. The Ambassador explained that while Cambodia has changed greatly since then, challenges remain in educating Washington to modernize perceptions of Cambodia, which are currently colored by the events of the 1970s. He suggested that the upcoming Deputy Secretary's visit to Cambodia presents an opportunity to enhance U.S. understanding of

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Cambodia in the twenty-first century and to bring the two countries even closer together.

17. (C) COMMENT: The Prime Minister has demonstrated increasing maturity, reflected in his government's restrained responses to a number of challenges over the past months. Hun Sen's cool-headedness in the face of armed conflict with an important neighbor is but one example. Another would appear to be the entrenchment of some modest democratic gains within the country. While there remains room for significant further progress, Hun Sen deserves some credit for these positive developments, as well as progress in the bilateral relationship.
MUSSOMELI